State Capital ‘Got Around’

CAPITAL OF STATE was once in the building at right was occupied.

at left at Donaldsonville. In 1850 the old state

State Capital Moved Often Amid Squabbles

Baton Rouge — like the soldiers, old and new to whom it now stands as a memorial, Louisiana’s old state capitol doesn’t fade away.

But gone, except in faint memory, is one of the old streets that once bisected the site on which the capitol is built.

That was “Repentence” St, whose very name perhaps tells why the capitol was located in Baton Rouge. It was, perhaps, because of a need for repentence.

For in the early years of statehood, the capital was New Orleans. The entertainment of that city must, however, have proved too attractive. And a movement started in 1823 to move the state capital from the Vieux Carre and the theaters of New Orleans.

Briefly the Legislature met in Donaldsonville. But that proved unsatisfactory, and again New Orleans was favored.

$100,000 VOTED

Then, in the constitutional convention of 1845, the draft submitted to the people stipulated the state capital should be located at a place not less than 60 miles from New Orleans. In 1846, the Legislature voted for Baton Rouge, and $100,000 was appropriated for the erection of a capitol building.

Col. James Harrison Dakin became the architect for the edifice to be located in a section of Baton Rouge that actually meant the obliteration of some or all of old “Repentence” St.

Col. Dakin decided on what he called the “Castellated Gothic” style of architecture because he thought “it is quite as appropriate as any other style or make of building and because no style or order of architecture can be employed which would give suitable character to a building with so little cost.”

HAD FIGHTS

Despite fights, actually one at the physical level, with the supplier of brick who seemed to favor supplying inferior brick, the structure was dedicated in December, 1849.

As though to herald a colorful future, the dedicatory ceremonies followed one of the most disastrous fires ever experienced by Baton Rouge. And $30,000 raised by townspeople for a gala celebration was diverted to aiding those who suffered when about a fifth of the city was wiped out by fire.

On Jan. 21, 1850, during the administration of Gov. Joseph Walker, the Legislature met for the first time in the new edifice. It was but a brief tenure.

WAS BARRACKS

In 1862, Baton Rouge was occupied by Federal troops who turned the state house into a barracks. In December of that year, the structure was almost destroyed by a fire which left only the walls standing.

During and after the Civil War, the state capital shifted to Opelousas, Shreveport and New Orleans. Finally it was re-established in Baton Rouge in 1878.

The old capitol was rebuilt and an upper story added to it. And in that fashion it housed the state government until 1932 when activities were shifted to the present new capitol building.

In 1946 the old capitol building was set up by the Legislature as a memorial to the war dead. Now it houses veterans’ organizations and some state departments.